

Dedication:

“To Jameelah, Sara & Fattin”

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Jeffery Lang

Struggling to Surrender:

Some Impressions
of an American Convert to Islam

Jeffery Lang

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PREFACE

Almost everything of their beauty could be traced to northern Europe—the delicate angularity of their features, their fair complexions, their long, lustrous golden-brown hair—but not their eyes: large, flashing dark brown eyes, the type you might steal a glance from at an outdoor market or on a village street in Arabia, the type that sees right through you and lingers in your memory for a long time.

"Why did you become a Muslim?" asked one of my two interrogators. What answer would their innocence comprehend? Both gazed up at me dispassionately, as if they had all eternity to wait for an explanation. Maybe they were not meant to understand but only to ask, to initiate the process of self-examination.

No. I thought, their question was more personal than that. I remember when I asked my own father why he had become a Catholic. It was not due to curiosity alone but a result of my own search for self-definition.

When I became a Muslim, I did not consider how many choices I was making, not just for myself but for my three daughters and their children and their descendants. Of course they needed to know why I made that decision, because it had been made for them as well and they would have to come to terms with it for the rest of their lives.

The prophet Muhammad said of his youngest daughter: "Fatimah is a part of me and I am a part of her. Her happiness is my happiness and her pain is my pain." A father finds special fulfillment in his relationship with his daughters. Through their feminine nature, he can reach beyond the limitations of his gender and is opened to a greater range of feelings and emotions than his public life allows. They complement and counter-balance him, not just as females but as his children, because he sees the completion of himself in their personalities. "Why did you become a Muslim?" holds an entirely different significance for me when it comes from my daughters, for it originates in me. It is my complementary voice, in its still untainted truthfulness, cross-examining me.

I explained it to them briefly and as well as I could, but not in a way that finalized the matter, as I wanted to be sure the door was left open for further inquiry. Their question is the impetus behind this book, which began as nightly reflections on their question.

If you are not honest with your daughters, you are being untrue to yourself. For that reason, I did my best to tell it as sincerely and honestly

CHAPTER 1

The Shahadah

Then Satan whispered to him, saying, "O Adam, shall I lead you to a tree of eternity and a kingdom which does not decay?" (20:121)¹

It was a tiny room with no furniture, and there was nothing on its plain white walls. Its only adornment was the predominantly red-and-white patterned carpet that covered the floor. There was a small window, like a basement window, above and facing us, filling the room with brilliant light. We were in rows; I was in the third. There were only men, no women, and all of us were sitting on our heels and facing the direction of the window.

It felt foreign. I recognized no one. Perhaps I was in another country. We bowed down uniformly, our faces to the floor. It was serene and quiet, as if all sound had been turned off. All at once, we sat back on our heels. As I looked ahead, I realized that we were being led by someone in front who was off to my left, in the middle, below the window. He stood alone. I only had the briefest glance at his back. He was wearing a long white garment, and on his head was a white scarf with a red design. And that is when I would awaken.

I was to have this dream several times during the next ten or so years, and it was always that brief and always the same. At first it made absolutely no sense but later I came to believe that it had some kind of religious connection. Although I shared it with persons close to me on at least one occasion, possibly two, it did not appear to be worth any further consideration. It did not trouble me and, as a matter of fact, I would feel strangely comfortable when I awoke.

It was at about the time of that first dream, either a little bit before or after, that I was expelled from religion class. Before that semester, I had never had any misgivings about my faith. I had been baptized, raised,

¹For the most part, I have relied on 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Brentwood, Maryland: Amana, 1983). This source was republished in 1992 under the title of *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an: New Edition with Revised Translation and Commentary*.

schooled, and confirmed a Catholic. It was "the one true religion"—at least in southern Connecticut. All my friends, neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances, with the exception of a few Jews, were Catholics. But one thing just led to another.

It was the beginning of my senior year at Notre Dame Boys' High School, and our religion teacher, a truly fine priest, decided that we needed to be convinced that God exists. And so he proceeded to prove it by arguing from first causes. I was a pretty good mathematics student and enamored of mathematical logic, so I could not resist the urge to challenge his conclusions.

My position was simply that an explanation is not a proof. The existence of a Supreme Being, if given the right attributes, could explain our existence and our deeper perceptions of guilt, right and wrong, and so on, but there are alternative explanations, such as those—admittedly imperfect—that we learn from science. While religions are still struggling with their own conflicts with reason, science appears to be making steady progress toward complete solutions. The ontological argument is hardly a proof, since one can argue that widespread belief in God may have its origins in widespread ignorance and fear. Perhaps the more secure we are in our knowledge, the less we will adhere to religion. This is the case with modern man, especially those in academia.

For the next few weeks we would argue in circles, and I was winning several classmates over to my point of view. When we reached a critical impasse, the Father advised me and those who agreed with me to leave the class until we could see things differently. Otherwise we would receive an F for the course.

Several nights later at dinner, I thought I had better explain to my parents why I was going to fail religion. My mother was shocked and my father was angry. "How can you not believe in God?" he screamed. Then he made one of those predictions of his that always have had a way of coming true: "God will bring you to your knees, Jeffrey! He'll bring you so low that you'll wish you were never born!" But why? I thought. Just because I could not answer my questions?

There I was, an atheist in the eyes of family, friends, and schoolmates. The strange thing was that, at this point in time, I had not abandoned my belief in God but instead was only pursuing a line of argument largely for the sake of argument. I had never stated that I disbelieved. What I **had** said was that I found the proofs presented to our religion class inadequate. Nonetheless, I did not reject this new designation because the altercation did have a profound effect on me. I came to realize that I was not sure what I believed or why.

In the months to come I would continue to challenge, in my mind, the existence of God. It was the spirit of our time to doubt our institutions, even religious ones. We were a generation raised on mistrust. In grade school we used to have air raid drills, during which we would run to the basement in anticipation of nuclear fallout. We stocked our cellars with provisions in case of such an emergency. Our heroes, the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr., were being assassinated and replaced by leaders who would eventually be forced into political exile and disgrace. There were race riots, burning and looting, especially in industrial towns like mine. Every night on television there were the body counts. There was a lingering fear that at any time you might be harmed by someone, and for something of which you had no knowledge. The idea that God had made us/it this way and, on top of that, that He was going to punish all but a few of us in the end, was more terrible and troubling than not to believe at all. I became an atheist when I was eight.

At first I felt free, for my new view liberated me from the phobia that ~~Supreme~~ was tapping into my thoughts and fantasies and condemning me. I was free to live my life for myself alone; there was no need to worry about satisfying the whims of a superhuman Power. To some extent, I was also proud that I had had the courage to accept responsibility for who I was and to assume control of my life. I was secure, for my feelings, perceptions, and desires were entirely mine and did not have to be shared with my Supreme Being or anyone else. I was the center of my universe: its creator, sustainer, and regulator. I decided for myself what was good and evil, right and wrong. I became my own god and savior. This is not to say that I became completely greedy and self-indulgent, for now I believed more than ever in sharing and caring. But my reason for so doing was not to attain a future reward: I felt a real genuine human love. We hold love to be the highest human emotion. Whether this is due to evolution, chance, or some eco-biological utility hardly matters, for it is as real as anything else and it makes us happy. When you give out love, you really do receive it ~~in return~~, here and now.

Going away to college is not the same as leaving home: you are simply not living with your parents any more. It is a transition between dependence and independence, a time and place when it is still safe to test your ~~views~~. I learned very quickly that no one knows loneliness like an atheist. When an average person feels isolated, he can call through the depths of his soul to One who knows him and sense an answer. An atheist cannot afford himself that luxury, for he has to crush the urge and remind himself of his absurdity. He may be the god of his own universe but it is a very

CHAPTER 2

The Qur'an

I make a bold assertion that the Koran is any less studied than it used to be, or that its haunting rhythms have lost their power over our minds.²

The appraisal, made by the orientalist Gibb in 1950, holds even more true today. The Qur'an, in the minds of many Muslims, has met and risen to the challenge of the West and is the driving force behind a world-wide Muslim awakening. It continues to be, for approximately one billion Muslims, "the ultimate manifestation of God's grace to man, the ultimate wisdom, and the ultimate beauty of expression: in short, the word of God."³

But what about the Western convert to Islam, who is far removed from its cultural traditions, and languages that this scripture helped to shape and preserve—what does he or she find compelling about the Qur'an?

This is not an obvious or necessary question, for not every religion's converts are familiar with its scriptures. It probably would not be asked so much of converts to Buddhism or Hinduism or Christianity, for example. Impressively every Western convert to Islam speaks of the primacy of the Qur'an in his or her life.

In addition, the common believer's reliance on the Qur'an is built into his religion because its recitation in the original Arabic is a compulsory part of the five daily prayers. As a result, all new Muslims learn several passages and their interpretation very quickly. This daily contact with the Qur'an opens the way to further study, and large numbers of newcomers report that they read some portion of the Qur'an in translation each day, learn from reciting parts of it during the prayer. Many go on to learn a good deal of Arabic, which, for Americans is quite atypical, and a few have even produced new and original Qur'anic commentaries and interpretations.⁴ Therefore, since the Qur'an is such an integral part of a Mus-

² H. R. Gibb, *Under Islam* (New York: A. M. S. Press, 1932), 350.

³ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al Andalus, 1980), ii.

⁴ See, for example, M. Irving, *The Qur'an: The First American Version* (Brattleboro, VT: Sojourner Books, 1985); Marmaduke W. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (New York: The Muslim World League, 1977).